



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## **Post-traumatic stress disorder symptom severity, trauma load and sleeping difficulties in trauma-exposed, treatment-seeking adolescents**

Aarde, C. V., Nothling, J., Armour, C., & Seedat, S. (2018). Post-traumatic stress disorder symptom severity, trauma load and sleeping difficulties in trauma-exposed, treatment-seeking adolescents. *South African Journal of Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajpsychiatry.v24i0.1300>

**Published in:**  
South African Journal of Psychiatry

**Document Version:**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

### **Publisher rights**

Copyright 2018 the authors.

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the author and source are cited.





### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

# Post-traumatic stress disorder symptom severity, trauma load and sleeping difficulties in trauma-exposed, treatment-seeking adolescents

**Authors:**Carissa van Aarde<sup>1</sup> Jani Nöthling<sup>1</sup> Cherie Armour<sup>2</sup> Soraya Seedat<sup>1</sup> **Affiliations:**<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychiatry,  
Stellenbosch University,  
South Africa<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Life and Health  
Sciences, Ulster University,  
United Kingdom**Corresponding author:**Carissa van Aarde,  
18229727@sun.ac.za**How to cite this article:**Van Aarde C, Nöthling J,  
Armour C, Seedat S.  
Post-traumatic stress disorder  
symptom severity, trauma  
load and sleeping difficulties  
in trauma-exposed,  
treatment-seeking  
adolescents. S Afr J  
Psychiat. 2018;24(0), a1300.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajpspsychiatry.v24i0.1300>**Copyright:**© 2018. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

**Introduction:** Sleep disturbances are associated with various anxiety- and trauma-related disorders, and specifically with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Two of the core symptoms of PTSD are recurrent distressing dreams about the traumatic event and difficulty in falling or staying asleep (insomnia). Sleep is essential for functioning, with poor sleep compromising cognitive, emotional and behavioural regulations. Sleep is also of particular importance for brain development and information processing in children and adolescents. The aim of this study was to determine if PTSD symptom severity and trauma load is associated with nightmares and insomnia in a sample of trauma-exposed, treatment-seeking adolescents.

**Methods:** A total of 358 South African adolescents, between 12 and 18 years of age, exposed to at least one DSM-5 qualifying traumatic event, were assessed for PTSD-related sleep difficulties using the Kiddie Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia (KSADS). Childhood exposure to 10 common trauma types was also recorded using the KSADS trauma checklist. PTSD symptom severity was measured using the child PTSD checklist (CPC).

**Results:** Adolescents reporting current trauma-related nightmares ( $F[268.2] = 0.68, t = -8.16, p = 0.000$ ) and current insomnia ( $F[265.2] = 0.16, t = -9.03, p = 0.000$ ) had significantly higher PTSD symptom severity scores compared to those without current nightmares and insomnia. Adolescents with current trauma-related nightmares ( $F[355.2] = 0.15, t = -3.30, p = 0.001$ ) and insomnia ( $F[353.2] = 0.15, t = -2.51, p = 0.013$ ) were also exposed to a significantly greater number of different trauma types compared to those without current nightmares and insomnia.

**Conclusion:** Assessing and treating sleep difficulties related to PTSD in trauma-exposed adolescents, in an effort to reduce the developmental impact of trauma on the brain and general functioning, should not be overlooked. Longitudinal studies may contribute to a better understanding of the long-term effects of trauma-related insomnia and nightmares on mental and physical health outcomes.

**Read online:**Scan this QR  
code with your  
smart phone or  
mobile device  
to read online.

**Note:** A selected abstract from papers presented at the 19th National Congress of the South African Society of Psychiatrists in 'Professional Psychiatric Practice: Medical, Socio-Economic & Cultural Perspectives', 21–24 September 2018, at the CSIR, Pretoria, South Africa. The congress is hosted by South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP).

This work is supported by the South African Research Chairs Initiative in PTSD supported by the Department of Science and Technology and the National Research Foundation, awarded to Soraya Seedat. Jani Nöthling is supported by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) National Health Scholars Programme.